

An Idyll of Bethlehem

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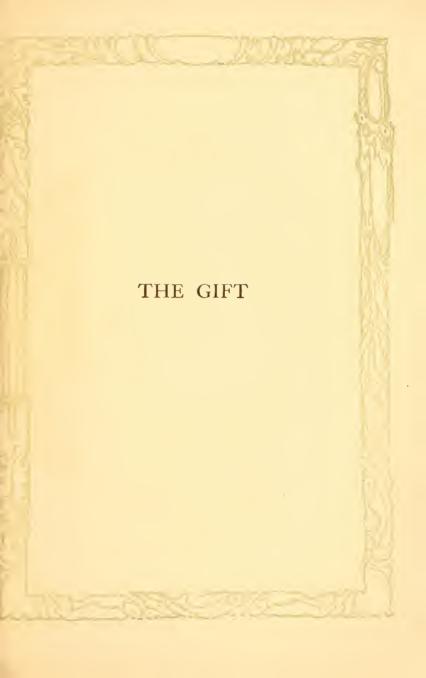
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"This is the Christ . . . And what wilt thou give him?"



An Idyll of Bethlehem

By

DAVID DE FOREST BURRELL



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HE boy Joshua was wearying of school. All through a sunny winter's morning the sparrows in the bush beside the synagogue

door had chirped madly to him to come out. From his place at the end of the half-circle of boys sitting cross-legged on the floor he could look out at the open door, across the slope, to the old pine grove whose tree-tops, in a gentle breeze, beckoned him out into a golden world. Rabbi Simeon was not very interesting. Joshua was tired of learning lengthy chapters out of the Law; and the rabbi had a provoking way of teaching the Scriptures without teaching what they meant. He was doing so now. A

sonorous line would issue from his lips, to be echoed and reëchoed from the lips of the boys. Just now it was one of the Psalms:

"Give the king thy judgments, O God, And thy righteousness unto the king's son. . . ."

Outside, a dog came and sat in the dusty road, eyeing the synagogue doors expectantly. Joshua watched him, the lesson droning on about his ears the while:

"The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall render tribute:

The kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. . . ."

The vivid image caught Joshua's attention. His childish imagination saw in a flash a throne-room filled with golden light, the great king on his ivory throne, and men,—kings themselves!—pouring out before him precious gifts. . . . The

dog outside was forgotten; Joshua's eyes were fixed at last on the rabbi:

"For he will deliver the needy when he crieth,

And the poor, that hath no helper. . . ."

This was growing interesting, decidedly; for were not Joshua and his mother numbered among the needy? Had he not waked that very morning to find her on her knees, calling on the God of the widowed and fatherless for bread? And had not the bread come, a great, round loaf from their neighbours up the hill,—and that even before the lad had left for school? . . .

"And they shall live; and to him shall be given of the gold of Sheba. . . ."

The echoing chorus was rudely shattered by a clear, shrill voice from the end of the half-circle: "Rabbi Simeon, who is this king to whom they bring such gifts?"

The old rabbi cast a startled and in-

dignant look at Joshua. "Peace, thou little disturber! Is it not enough for thee to learn thy Scriptures without turning them inside out?"

The little fellow shook his head. "Nay," said he stoutly, "but I want to know who this king is who—who delivers the needy——" and his voice trailed off into a teary murmur. The other boys had fixed curious eyes on him; they were smiling at his worn cloak, wrapped so tight about his shoulders in the chill room. The rabbi's eyes caught it all, and softened.

"Had thine eyes been on thy teacher, rather than on the world yonder, thou needest not have asked. It is the Messiah of whom Solomon speaketh in his Psalm. When he cometh, men, yea, kings, will lay before him their best."

"Shall we see him?" asked Joshua eagerly.

"It may be," answered Rabbi Simeon; "for some do say his time draweth nigh."

"And what shall we give him? What shall I?"

Rabbi Simeon looked down at the little figure wrapped in its worn cloak. He knew how bare the humble home was. What had the lad to give? The other boys were whispering and smiling derisively. The rabbi's voice was somewhat gentler still as he answered, "Thou must ask thy mother, my son."



SK her he did, that very day. He ran home from the synagogue, down the street to the little stone house, and in at the door,

to throw his arms around his mother and cry into her astonished ears, "Mother, mother, what can I give him?" "Nay, nay," she laughed, as she kissed his brown cheek; "save thy breath for a moment, and tell me what 'tis all about. Give whom?"

" Messiah."

"Messiah? Hath Rabbi Simeon been talking of Messiah?"

Joshua sat himself down close by her side, her arm about his shoulders.

"Yea, he hath," he said eagerly; "but he would not have done it if I had not asked. Why can he not tell things without being asked?"

"But what did he tell?" the mother persisted.

"It was the Psalm of Solomon,—'Give the king thy judgments, O God,'—and when we came to where the kings bring gifts, gold and—and other things—I asked who he was—the one they brought them to, thou knowest; and Rabbi Simeon said it was Messiah; and then I

asked if we would see him, and the rabbi said it might be; and then—I asked what I could give him—and the boys laughed—and the rabbi said I should ask thee."

His voice was low, and his lips were trembling. The mother's arm tightened about him; she put her hand under his chin, lifted his face, and kissed the tears from his cheeks. Her own voice trembled, but she spoke with a brave smile on her lips and in her eyes: "We know not when Messiah cometh, son of mine. It may be, as the rabbi saith, he will come shortly. But be thou of good cheer: if he cometh, thou hast something very precious to give him."

His black eyes opened wide. "I? What have I?" He fingered his cloak. "This?"

"Nay; something better."

His eyes turned quickly to her hand. On one worn finger gleamed a heavy seal ring, too large for the boy's finger for years to come.

"Nay, not thy father's ring," she answered his question before he could frame it; "something better still."

His eyes opened wider yet at that. He had not thought anything in the world more precious than that ring. "Better than father's ring?" his puzzled voice repeated; and he looked up into his mother's face ardently. "What is it, my mother?"

But she would not tell. She smoothed the tumbled curls back from his forehead, kissed the perplexed wrinkles away, and answered only, "Thou must find out for thyself, my son."



ITTLE Joshua, coming out of the synagogue school on a midwinter's noon, found the town suddenly alive with stran-

gers. The shout of donkey-drivers, the tinkle of camels' bells, the barking of dogs, mingled with cries of welcome as townsfolk and dusty wayfarers recognized in each other old friends and kinsfolk. Before ever Joshua had reached his home through the crowd his sharp ears had learned most of what his mother, at the door, was waiting to tell him. These were all of their own blood, she said, people of the tribe of Judah and of the house of David, come to the home of their fathers for the census which Quirinius, the governor, had ordered.

"All our kinsfolk, mother!" cried little Joshua, looking up the thronged street.

"Yea," she answered, "and sorry enough to come hither, too! Some have journeyed even from Galilee,—to please a Roman!"

The lad could scarcely be made to eat his bread before he was out and up the street. There was but one place where any boy would think of going in such a situation. It was the khan, the inn, whose great gates hung wide on their hinges this day; whose wide court echoed with the hubbub of a crowd of men and beasts; whose stalls, under the arches around the court, were filled to overflowing before the lad had reached its deeparched entrance. His black eyes opened wide and wider as he wandered about, now watching a camel train kneel and unload, now listening open-mouthed to the curses of a surly driver, now standing by while two old men, long parted, fell on each other's neck and wept.

At length those eager eyes took in a little group standing to one side, near the archway, as if caught in an eddy on the edge of the current: a woman, seated on a cloak spread on an ass's back, and a man, holding the leading-rope and talking earnestly to Elias the gate-keeper. They were Galileans: everybody knew a Galilean at sight, by his clothes and his rustic air. Joshua's eyes were fixed on the woman now, and he heard little of what the two men said. Her face was like his mother's, he thought; though when you came to look closely, it was very different and had no lines or wrinkles; still, it was like his mother's face, weary, and gentle, and cleareved. . . .

The Galilean pulled at the leading-rope and, with Elias leading the way, started across the court, the patient ass following along a winding way between men and

beasts and bales and bundles of all sorts, disappearing at last through the gate in the far wall.

Joshua turned to other and more exciting things.



HE next morning when the little fellow sat up and rubbed his eyes, he saw his mother standing by his side.

"Up, lazy one!" she chid him gently, smiling down at him. "All the town's awake; thy morning meal waits for thee; and I have a tale that will open thy sleepy eyes wide."

While they ate their bread and lentils she told him the tale. Lying awake far into the night, she had heard footsteps without, and the voices of men talking excitedly as they passed. Just a sentence

her ears had caught, a voice she seemed to know saying, "To the khan first. Did not the angel say we would find the babe lying in a manger? And where so likely as in the crowded stalls at the khan?" Quickly she had risen and run to the door; but the street was empty, only the sound of footsteps faint and fainter in the distance convincing her that she had not dreamed. She heard the pounding of a staff on wood; they were at the gate of the khan: then voices again dying away as they were admitted by the sleepy Elias. The night was still again. Back to her pallet-bed she had gone, to lie awake, wondering at what she had heard. Before sleep had touched her eyes she had heard again the voices, no longer talking, but singing as they drew near through the sleeping street. Again she had stolen to the door to see; and as she looked, the late

moon moved from behind a cloud and silvered all the world. There were the men before her, not strangers, but the shepherds from the sacrificial fold on the hill. So they passed, their uplifted faces clear-cut in the moonlight, their voices ringing on the air in the song of an ancient shepherd of their town:

"He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass,

As showers that water the earth;
In His days shall the righteous flourish,
And abundance of peace, till the moon
be no more. . . ."

"It is the same Psalm," Joshua broke in, "the same one we had in school!"

His mother nodded. "And now," she said,—and her eyes sparkled as she spoke,—"now comes the heart of my tale. This morning at daybreak I went up to the khan and asked Elias what had happened. He gave me a queer look and a shrug of his fat shoulders. 'There

was a babe born in the stable down yonder,' he said; and he laughed."

Little Joshua nodded his head. "I know," he put in; "he wheezes when he laughs."

"So he does," agreed his mother, with a smile. "And he said 'Elon and Joses and the other shepherds from the hill came in the night with a wild tale of angels and other folly; and nothing would do but I should take them down to the stable. And behold, down on their knees before the babe went they, to worship him!' And little son of mine, what dost think Elias heard them call the babe?"

The lad had forgotten his half-eaten breakfast. His eyes were fixed on her face, his hands tight clasped. She bent towards him, and her voice fell as she said, "The Christ!"

Joshua's eyes widened. He looked at her a moment, and drew a long breath.

"Oh, mother, mother!" he cried. "He did come! He did come! And now tell me,—what can I give him?"

She drew him close to her and laughed softly, though her voice had the sound of tears in it. "I will not tell thee, little son. Thou must find out for thyself."



EVER did a morning in school pass as slowly as that one. From his seat at the end of the halfcircle Joshua could, by

twisting his head, see through the eastern door the wall of the khan; and Rabbi Simeon must needs rebuke him a score of times for craning his neck to look at the world rather than recite with the others a noble passage from the Mishna. Free at last, the lad broke from the others at the door and darted down the street. He made his way into the court of the khan, on through the gate at the far side, and down the slope, -only to find at the stable door a self-appointed guard of women who bade him be off.

The rest of the day he hung about the place; but not till the next afternoon did his opportunity come. The women, with their officious air, were not in the way when he reached the stable door. He cast a wary eye about him, tugged with all his weight at the heavy door and slipped inside.

It was dark for a moment. He heard the cattle chewing on their cuds and breathing noisily. Then he could see them, their heads turned to give the intruder a mild regard. And then, from the far end of the cave, some one-a man-spoke:

"Who art thou?"

The lad did not hesitate. "Joshua," [21]

his clear young voice answered, shrill with excitement.

"Come hither."

He could see better now as he slowly stepped forward. The man sat on the straw against the wall; and beside him lay a woman; and a babe was in her arms.

He knew the man and woman as soon as he saw them. They were the Galileans he had seen in the courtyard. The recognition gave him courage. He came and stood before them in silence.

"What wilt thou, little Joshua?" asked the woman softly.

Joshua thought her more than ever like his mother. His eyes fell to the child sleeping in her arms; and he spoke out.

"Mother told me the Christ had been born here, and I wanted to see him—to give him something——"

The two looked at each other quickly. The mother nestled the sleeping babe closer to her and said quietly, "Thou sayest. This is the Christ.... And what wilt thou give him?"

A shadow crossed the lad's face. He hesitated. "I do not know," he broke out; "I—I thought—I thought I might ask you. Mother would not tell me. She said——"

He stopped short.

"She said what?"

He hung his head. "She said I must find out for myself; and I have thought, and thought. . . . It is not my cloak—nor my father's ring—and that is all I have!"

He looked up pleadingly, to find her smiling into his face.

"I know what thy mother meant," she said; "but she is right. Thou must find out for thyself. It is very precious,"

- "Will he like it?" he queried eagerly.
- "Yea, better than gold or gems," she answered him.
- "Then," said little Joshua bravely, fighting with the tears that would come, "I will find out for myself, and I will give it him."



OR a month and more the lad was the devoted slave of the Galileans. The mother and her child had been moved to

the upper room of the khan. Thither Joshua flew daily, as soon as school was out. He found them, usually, on the flat roof before their door, and set himself to serve them with all the simple ardour of a child's heart. When he found that the babe was to bear the very name he bore, his eagerness redoubled. He ran their errands; he fetched water for them from

the well, staggering under the weight of the water-jar as he panted up the steps to the roof; all he asked was a smile from the young mother, or the unspeakable privilege of having the babe's tiny fist close around one of his brown fingers. But as he watched mother and child, ever and anon his brow would wrinkle and his face would sober; and Mary, the mother, seeing it, would smile at him, knowing that he was puzzling his little head once more over the mystery of his gift for the Christ-child.

Then, suddenly, came the answer; and on this wise:

It was in the night that silver bells came a-tinkling down the street and woke the town. Joshua's mother, half awake, stumbled to the door to see. The lad slipped past her, rubbing his eyes. Through the shadows a train of camels was passing swiftly towards the khan.

A neighbour running by stopped long enough to tell the news: Persians they were, Wise Men from the East, asking "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?"—and the man ran on towards the khan. Before the mother could lay hand on him, Joshua had followed.

The caravan was already in the great courtyard when the lad entered the gate. Torches, flaring against the walls, cast a flickering light over the scene. Camels were kneeling, teamsters already unloading the pack animals, silver bells still softly tinkling on the empty saddles of three tall dromedaries. Joshua's eyes sought the roof. A light shone forth from the door of the upper room, and figures stood dark against it. His little feet pattered up the outer stairway. Quickly he twisted through the group at the door till, under an elbow, he could peer within. There knelt the Persians in

their flowing robes, and bowed low before the babe, who lay close-nestled in his mother's arms.

There was a stir at the door. Some one thrust Joshua aside. The servants of the strangers entered, knelt, and laid before the babe their burdens, golden vessels that gleamed and sparkled with precious stones and sent forth sweet odours that filled the room. Yet the babe looked never once at the precious gifts, but gazed wide-eyed at the light held high beside him by Elias the porter.

No one had observed little Joshua at the door; and no one noticed when he slipped away. Outside, in the dim starlight on the roof, his mother found him with his head on his arm, weeping bitterly. Her arm around him and his face on her breast, she found out his trouble.

"Oh, mother, mother!" he said with quivering voice; "they are in there, and

they have such wonderful gifts for the Christ, golden things, and jewels. . . . And I would love to give him something, and I have nothing to give!"

"Yea, thou hast," she said.

He shook his head, his face hidden against her. "I have tried and tried, and I cannot think of anything. And I asked the Christ's mother, and she just smiled like you and said I must find out for myself."

"Look up at me," said his mother.

He raised his tear-stained face and looked into her eyes.

"Tell me, dost love thy mother?"

He hugged her close for an answer.

"And if thou lovest me, what hast thou given me out of thy love?"

He looked at her, puzzled, for a moment; then his face cleared. "I know, I know!" he cried, and suddenly broke from her arms and ran across the roof and in at the door of the upper room.

The onlookers in the doorway were startled to feel a slight form slip by them. On the ears of the Wise Men, as they sat in silent reverence before the Christ-child, broke the sound of a boy's shrill voice.

"I know, I know!" it cried; and little Joshua, before them all, knelt at Mary's knee, forgetful of the precious gifts that lay about him, unconscious of indignant eyes that were fixed upon him. "I know!" he cried. "It is my heart,—my heart!"

And Mary, forgetful, too, of the startled dignity that waited before her babe, smiled into the lad's eyes. "Thou hast said," she answered him. "It is thy heart."

The lad laughed aloud in his joy. "I gave him that long ago," he said. His brow wrinkled for an instant, and he looked at the child, then at the mother, questioningly.

Mary answered his unspoken query:

"Thou must grow up before he can claim thee as his very own."

He nodded solemnly; and then, with sudden thought, "How will he find me?" he asked.

"Never fear," the mother said. "He will find his own.—And now—yonder is thy mother at the door."

Suddenly conscious of a room full of people whose astonished and indignant eyes were fixed on him, the little fellow turned to flee, only to be halted by the upraised hand of one of the Persians.

"Tell me, my son," said the Wise Man's deep voice in Joshua's own tongue, "what hast thou done? What dost thou know?"

Joshua hung his head in shame, remembering Rabbi Simeon's many reproofs for his ill-manners.

The voice of Mary came to his defense: "He did but bring a gift to my babe."

"And thy gift, my son,—what was it?"

The lad was silent, eyes on the floor.

"Speak," said Mary softly.

He raised his head, found himself looking into the Wise Man's deep eyes, saw there no hint of anger, took courage and whispered, "My heart."

The room was silent. The golden lamplight danced on the wondrous jewels on the floor; it set the precious stones encrusting them to sparkling madly; it lighted up the face of the babe sleeping in his mother's arms,

The Wise Man spoke again; and there seemed to be in his voice a sigh as for something lost. "It is the best gift of all, my son. Better thy heart than our gold. Peace to thee, and to the mother that hath taught thee this."

And at that little Joshua, released from the spell that had bound him, fled from

the room and found refuge, out in the night, in his mother's arms.

"Didst thou wish it?" he whispered.

In the darkness she smiled and patted his curly head.

"Wish it? Thy father and I gave thee to the Christ at thy birth. Only—I wanted thee to find it out for thyself."

"But thou didst help me," said Joshua.

And at that his mother laughed a quiet little laugh. "Yea, verily," she said; "but mothers must always help. . . . Come, it is midnight, and little lads must have sleep."

So little Joshua, leaving his heart with the sleeping babe, went down with his mother, through the starlit streets, to dream of the day when the Christ, a man grown, should seek him out and claim his own.

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